



Committee: Environment and Transportation

Testimony on: SB 523—Department of Natural Resources – Jack Cover Identification of Vernal Pools (Vernal Pool Wetlands Protection Act of 2026)

Position: Favorable

Hearing Date: April 2, 2026

The Audubon Society of Central Maryland (ASCM) is a 501C3 nonprofit with a mission to protect birds and other wildlife, and we recognize the vital contributions that vernal pools play in supporting invertebrates, amphibians, birds, and other wildlife in wetlands throughout the state of Maryland. To protect these crucial ecological services, ASCM strongly supports SB 523, to be amended with the title Jack Cover Identification of Vernal Pools Act of 2026.

ASCM's members throughout Carroll, Frederick, and Howard Counties care about Maryland's wildlife diversity and abundance. ASCM's own wildlife sanctuary in Mt. Airy hosts wood frogs in its woodland vernal pool. Often small and overlooked, these temporary wetlands play outsized roles in forested ecosystems. In early spring they are home to fairy shrimp and nurseries for wood frogs and spotted salamanders. As the season progresses, they become a buffet for birds like great blue herons and barred owls, as well as Rusty Blackbirds and other rare and endangered species. These quiet temporary ponds are fountains of abundance that maintain the health and biodiversity of numerous forests.

Filling, dredging, logging, agricultural expansion, and widespread urbanization have seriously diminished these unique sources of biodiversity and ecosystem services. The threats of a warming climate make their future still more precarious, especially in the face of the recent withdrawal of federal protections under the U.S. Clean Water Act. We do not even know how many remain in Maryland or where many are located.

Other states such Massachusetts and Rhode Island have set examples by enacting laws and regulations that protect vernal pools and their margins; our state needs to build a list of existing vernal pools that could be used to begin this essential work. This year, Maryland can take a major step toward fostering biodiversity, forest health, and water quality by beginning the identification of these vital small wetlands in our state.

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We thank the co-sponsors of this bill and everyone involved for working with Vernal Pool Partners to develop reasonable language for this bill that would take steps toward protection while respecting state budget constraints. We urge you to pass the vitally important act, honoring the legacy of Maryland aquatic habitat champion Jack Cover by assuring that these ephemeral wetlands continue to enrich our woods and watersheds long into the future.

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